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ABSTRACT

Women are taught from a very early age that their major role to be played in society is that of wife and mother. This lesson appears to be reinforced throughout a girl's life, especially if she is educated in coeducational institutions. In such sexually mixed institutions, girls are not only in competition for men, but they are in competition with men as well. Thus, the female faces an identity crisis that would be avoided. At single sex institutions, women can compete among themselves in the sciences as well as in traditional female areas. Women in women's colleges are able to develop leadership qualities in student government and college committees without sacrificing their feminity. If the women's college should disappear from the higher education community, women will be the ones to suffer from immeasurably poorer educational opportunities. (HS)

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Coeducation?

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American Alumni Council Special Conference

The Single Sex College - In Transition?

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Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen: I was announced, at least in the preliminary program, as speaking on "The Why-Not of Co-Education." My immediate reaction, when I read that title, was that I didn't like it. Nevertheless, I deliberately didn't ask that it should be changed because I wanted to use it to make a point. The issue, as I see it, is not and should not be, why not co-education; but why is separate education sound. I'm not going to try this morning to convert co-educational institutions, old or new, to separate education, but I am going to try to say why I think it is important to urge that the others wait a minute before all of them abandon separate education.

The case for separate education needs to be made, I judge, at this conference (and others of similar character) where the tone seems to be, at least implicitly, one that argues that co-education is the only sensible arrangement in higher education. It needs to be made in general because of what I would regard as a very real danger that a foolish and uncritical conformity with fashion may have very real social losses. This is an area--like many others with which we are familiar in our society over the course of American history--in which the net disadvantages of "progress" made may not be seen until it is too late. In trying to make this case, I am going to emphasize separate education for women, and not because I think the case does not exist for separate education for men. I think one most certainly does, perhaps especially at the pre-college level but including the college level. I'm making the case for separate education for women, not because I

lack acquaintance with the three major types of institutions, since I have lived and worked in all three kinds. I want to make this case because of the significant and serious differences in how the society conspires against young women and in consequence may handicap them as adults.

I should point out at the outset that I am speaking for myself and not for Mount Holyoke College, though I recognize that there are pitfalls in attempting to maintain the distinction. If I needed to be reminded of this problem my memory would have been refreshed by the recent vicissitudes in New Haven. Nevertheless, it is essential that I make that point because, like any other reasonably aware institution, we are presently looking at this question. We have a committee, made up of faculty, trustees, alumnae, students, and administration, who are examining the matter of the future policy of Mount Holyoke concerning co-education. I would not want to predict the outcome of those deliberations.

Let me offer one other precaution. I think it is important in looking at this issue to keep the educational discussion separate from the merely financial. I think that it is exceedingly important in all of our thinking, not to mix the problem, the question, of the financial future of the independent college or university, especially the small one, with the educational question of how it should execute its mission. This is not because I am unaware of the financial problem and not because I am unaware of the possibility that financial questions may, in a number of individual instances, settle the issue. Rather it is because it seems to me that there is much too much of the current rhetoric that is merely partially disguised rationalization of a financial situation in nominally educational language. We know little enough about education, I think I can say in these precincts, without corrupting

what we do know with different, although not necessarily irrelevant, considerations.

The essential point in the case, it seems to me, is the substantial "why" of diversity. Not the why of custom, not the why of habit, and certainly not the why of devotion to the fetish of choice as such, although it has widespread currency in a society where one is urged, at every hour of the day over television and radio, to do the thing of one's choice as if there were no hierarchy of values by which to test one's preferences. There is a substantial why of diversity, particularly as it affects young women.

I would like to start from the point of social conditioning, how the society conspires against the young. I am going to over-simplify, but you will forgive me. With the boy, the young man, society places an enormous emphasis on his choosing, on his deciding or thinking very early about what he will choose to make of himself. He is asked--by his aunts and uncles, his grandparents and parents, his friends and his teachers, and everybody else--from about as early as he can listen, what he is going to be. What is he going to make of himself? What he is going to do? The emphasis in his conditioning is on that kind of choice, on competition, in a struggle in a not too friendly world.

This kind of conditioning may, with the young man, often be harsh and handicapping. But that is not the point that I want to pursue here this morning. I mention it only to draw a contrast. Because, with the girls, the pattern is sharply different. Despite some changes within the last half-century, the conditioning pattern for the young girl is one which assumes uniformity, which assumes the absence of the kind of choice that

is thrust, if not imposed, upon the boy. In spite of the presence of some alternative models in the adult society around the young girl, the standard pattern still is for her to assume that there is one thing and one thing only that she will do and should do and must do. Now this kind of conditioning, I would argue, is wasteful enough when a woman in later, adult experience is substantially supportive of the early training. When the experience she has as an adult is consistent with the kinds of expectations concerning her usefulness, her satisfactions, and her way of life that she has acquired through such early conditioning, the results may be wasteful for society and for her, but they probably are not seriously harmful. We know that even today that is far from uniformly the experience. All we have to do is witness the crop of bored and frustrated suburban housewives, over-educated diaper changers, and under-utilized community workers. The contrast between the early conditioning and expectations of girls and their later experience as adults is enormous. We certainly also know that in the decades ahead such adult experiences will be even less consistent with the expectations that are developed by this kind of conditioning. Even if we cannot know now precisely what the new definitions of women's roles will be in the decades ahead, we know they will be different.

The pinch comes, I think, from two facts, and I am quite certain that they are facts. One is that the social conditioning of the women who will be 40 years old in the year 2000 is already substantially complete. The ten-year-olds today who will be forty in the year 2000 have been exposed now, most of them, to 10 very important years of conditioning in the pattern that I have just described. The second fact is that this conditioning process, if our past experience is any guide at all, is likely to change much less

rapidly than the character of the adult environment itself. The experiences to which women will be exposed will change, as you well know. The conditioning that is given to the young girl, particularly the pre-adolescent girl, is not likely to change with anything like the same rapidity. This is because it comes from so many sources, is subject to so little planning and control, and because it rests so heavily upon convention, upon habit.

The potential cruelty and tragedy of this situation are exemplified by an essentially false choice that a great many young women feel compelled to make, at least unconsciously. At a point, say, in middle or even early adolescence, when many girls are beginning to find themselves intellectually, are about to discover that they may have capacity and promise, and are beginning, therefore, to find themselves vocationally, at least by implication, they are likely to feel a conflict, and a serious one, between those very exciting and important possibilities and the equally strong and natural pull to be a desirable female. This is a false choice but that does not make it any less real. It is a choice that is thrust upon them by the very conditioning process to which I have referred.

There are, of course, a great many young women who even at this age find acceptable, comfortable ways of making the choice or of dealing with its falsity. Given the very wide range of differences among girls in character, personality, talents, and maturity, this is to be expected. But many do not find such an acceptable way of handling the problem, or do not find a way of handling it that is in any reasonable degree easy. The personal and social waste in this false but real situation, is, I think, incalculable, especially if the young woman chooses consciously or unconsciously to subordinate her development as a person and an intellect to her success as a female.

If this kind of waste is to be minimized, these many young women need a setting in which they can work through this question with a minimum of compulsion and a maximum of opportunity for rational and healthful development. Working out an individual solution, or rather establishing the basis for a solution, to the difficult problem of a complex of alternative or successive roles, requires a growth in self-awareness, a conscious intellectual grasp of the complexities and dilemmas in the problem, and above all a self-confidence that will reinforce commitment and support fresh starts as the time arrives to move from one phase of a complex life to another. Accomplishing these things will always, in any circumstances, be difficult. Their achievement, it seems to me, is far more likely in a setting that is essentially dedicated to that objective.

This, it seems to me, is the new mission of the separate women's college. Mary Lyon's hypothesis, that women can be educated to the same level as men, has been validated long since. If the case for the woman's college rested solely on her assertion, a case would no longer exist. The why of diversity today rests on a proposition emerging from the very success of her undertaking, namely, that young women need an educational experience that is different, not in specific academic content but in its broad commitment to meeting the specific needs of women in a changing society.

If you ask whether this can or should be attempted by co-educational institutions, the answer is yes. But within the predictable future I doubt that it will be done by such institutions, or will be done as successfully as in the women's colleges. The special courses and counselling arrangements for women can be provided, of course. But the total setting, which really determines the experience, as we all should know, is not likely to be supportive to many

women in a co-educational institution. Faculties and administrators delude themselves, and have for years, with the notion that because a student, whether a boy or a girl, is in tutelage in the classroom for 15 or so hours a week, that tutelary experience is having a decisive impact on him. We know that is not quite the case. Hopefully, the classroom has some influence by itself, but we know perfectly well that it is the total setting in which the instruction occurs that is really important. And it is this total setting that Rosemary Park refers to in the interview that was reported recently in the Chronicle of Higher Education, in which she said that she seriously questions "whether women in a totally co-educational situation get as good a deal intellectually as they do at a women's college."

It is perfectly clear that, among other things, the choice of courses and majors by women are significantly different in a women's college and in a co-educational one. This can't all be self-selection. It is true, for example, that the college which I have the privilege of heading now is one that has been distinguished over the years in the sciences, and undoubtedly there has been a kind of self-perpetuating quality in that achievement. But I know also that on that campus it is not unfeminine to be a physicist or a chemist or a mathematician or a biologist. It is not expected as a result of the subtle conditioning that goes on there, that one makes one's choice of major according to the role-conditioning that the girl has received from her family and her early education. Not that we don't have a child study center; not that we don't do work in developmental psychology; not that we don't do a great many other things of special interest to women. But the opportunity is also there, without any loss of status or self-regard, to pursue a major that the student as a person feels is right for her, without

any concern for what may be "the thing for a girl to do." Women on their own campus, as Margery Foster, Dean of Douglass College, pointed out in a report very recently, are first-class citizens, thoroughly able to gain the experience and the confidence that comes from successful leadership. It is significant, as Dean Foster also points out in that report, that when a woman on a co-educational campus becomes an editor or the president of a student body, it is front page news in the New York Times or an equivalent document. It is not front-page news when a woman becomes the editor of the student paper on a women's college campus, or the president of the student body, or the chairman of the student academic policy committee, or a member of a faculty committee, or any other position of leadership. That is what she is there for. That is her opportunity. That is her very special challenge in the setting that can be provided by the woman's college.

This setting, in order to be effective, does not require a convent atmosphere, and it is perfectly consistent with arrangements for exchange among various institutions at a time when mixing and competition with men are desired and timely. Girls don't all develop at the same rate, any more than men do. There is no reason to doubt that it is a good idea for many of our students, particularly in their junior or senior year, if they wish ~~to~~, as many of them do, to take courses and seminars at Amherst or the University of Massachusetts, where they are intellectually fully in competition with men. If they are ready for it and they want it, fine. Nor does it do a bit of harm that we have approximately twenty young men, exchange students from men's colleges, who are living on our campus this year in addition to the Amherst and University students who are there taking individual courses. But this is a woman's campus and the girls are first-class citizens

there, a fact that is a little rough on some of the boys to discover, though they thoroughly enjoy themselves, judging from the reports that I have had from them. There is, I repeat, no reason why a woman's college requires a convent atmosphere for its educational effectiveness. But I would like to suggest that the woman on a co-educational campus who is still trying to find herself as a person and who feels that she must both compete with men and compete for men is given a pretty rough deal. In those circumstances it may be much easier and much more "natural," to use a word that is much abused when the subject of co-education is under discussion, to become a pom-pom girl.

Other arguments that I could raise are less specifically educational in character, such as the point, of which I am increasingly persuaded, that there is a greater likelihood of recapturing a genuine sense of community on a women's college campus than on a co-educational one. But the arguments that I have presented already are essentially the major ones. At the practical level it is entirely possible that unthinking fashion and the fact that most separate colleges are small--with all of the economic problems which that situation implies--may make the woman's college, as well perhaps as the small co-educational or men's college, non-viable. That is not yet clear. But if it becomes certain, if the woman's college disappears, I am persuaded that the educational opportunities for many women will be immeasurably poorer and that the society will have suffered a very serious loss. Thank you.